

U.S. 20 project waits for funds

Despite uncertainties, officials feel project is on right track

By Travis Morse, The Journal-Standard

FREEPORT -- With an additional \$3 million in federal funding likely secured for the project, local officials are anxious to move forward on establishing a four-lane U.S. 20 from Freeport to Galena. The Illinois Department of Transportation's most optimistic estimates are that the project could be completed in 20 years.



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Earlier this week, Congressman Don Manzullo, R-Egan, announced he was able to secure \$3 million in the long-range federal transportation funding bill to use for the U.S. 20 expansion. The U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee approved the funding as part of the new six-year federal highway program known as TEA-LU, according to a news release from Manzullo's office.

Next week, the legislation will go to the full House for consideration. It also has to be approved by the Senate and signed by the President before funding is released.

"We're trying to get as much money as soon as we can to get this thing going," said Rich Carter, a Manzullo spokesman.

The funding can be used for any part of the U.S. 20 project, which is estimated to cost between \$600 million and \$800 million. Previously, Manzullo was involved in securing \$3.8 million for the project in 1998 and \$1.1 million in 2002 with the help of Sen. Dick Durbin, D-IL, according to the news release.

"This money is allocated to Highway 20," said State Rep. Jim Sacia, R-Pecatonica. "It's a drop in the bucket, but at least it's money and it's go-ahead money."

A key part of getting the project done, Carter said, will be to convince the State of Illinois to use a significant portion of the federal funding it receives from the new federal highway program on the U.S. 20 project. The funds are allocated to states for general transportation uses, but could be used for U.S. 20. The \$3 million earmark should help convince the state to prioritize the project, Carter said.

"We really need to come together and convince the Governor to bring more road money back to (U.S.) 20," Carter said, adding that more than 95 percent of the \$275 billion in federal road money in the TEA-3 legislation will go to states in formula grants. The exact amount of federal funding for Illinois has not been determined.

Although some of the funding issues are still uncertain at this point, state officials are steadily moving forward on the project, said Jon McCormick, project manager for IDOT.

The entire project involves building a four-lane U.S. 20 on a 47-mile stretch of the highway from Freeport to Galena. So far, work has primarily focused on the Freeport Bypass and Galena Bypass segments of the project.

"It's making good progress," McCormick said. "It's been moving steadily along with no problems."

The Freeport Bypass segment is divided into two pieces, east and west. The eastern half includes about six miles of highway from where the bypass starts at Springfield Road to Illinois 26. Bids will be let for this portion in June and construction should start in August and continue through 2007, McCormick said. Paving will start in 2006 and the eastern portion should be finished in 2007.

The western half of Freeport Bypass includes four miles from Illinois 26 to AYP Road. IDOT currently is in phase one of this segment, which includes environmental reports and design work. Officials plan to finish phase one this summer and then phase two planning should take until 2007. Construction likely will start in the first half of 2007 and the western half likely will be done in 2009.

As for the Galena Bypass, that segment still is in the environmental impact statement stage, which will be completed this year. Design work for this portion of the project likely will be completed in 2007 and then construction will follow. The bypass includes six and a half miles of road from the northwest side of Galena to the southeast side of Galena.

Specific completion dates have not yet been established for the other segments of the U.S. 20 project. So far, McCormick said, funding has only been allotted for the design work for Freeport Bypass, the construction work for the eastern half of Freeport Bypass and part of the design work for the Galena Bypass.

A long-time advocate of the project, Freeport Mayor Jim Gitz was pleased to hear about the \$3 million earmark and is confident the state considers U.S. 20 a major priority. Even so, he said there are several factors that could affect future funding for the project, including the overall amount of federal road money coming to the state and the formula used to arrive at that total.

The \$3 million allocation is "seed money" that will keep the project going and encourage IDOT to make U.S. 20 a priority, Gitz said. Despite uncertainties still present regarding funding, Gitz said the project is much further along than it was when the last federal highway program was approved in 1998.

"The U.S. 20 project is in a qualitatively better position than in 1998," Gitz said, adding that since that time the project is a higher public priority, the environmental impact statement for the project was finished, and the state has pledged funds to start on certain parts of the expansion. "We're probably a long ways away from completing (it), but I hope we can keep pushing for that."

With construction work pending, Gitz said the major factor now is how much money will be available each year for the expansion. Supporters of the project must continue to voice their desire to complete U.S. 20 as soon as possible, Gitz said.

Not only will the expansion greatly improve the area's economic development capabilities, but

it will make U.S. 20 much safer for Illinois drivers, Gitz said. Currently, there is an average of one accident every working day of the year on U.S. 20, Gitz said, and the problem is only getting worse as traffic levels grow.

Gitz said the project is a long-time coming. He estimates the expansion has been discussed in some form or another for 50 to 60 years, with major progress starting in the early 1990s when work was begun on the environmental impact statement.

"I'm quite anxious to move this project along," Gitz said. "Everybody's in agreement that this is a highway segment that needs to be built."